

1.0 SETTING

1.1 GRTA'S MISSION & VISION

Surging population growth, rapidly expanding commercial and residential development, limited transportation alternatives to the single-occupancy vehicle, and one of the highest ratios of miles traveled per vehicle in the country threaten Metropolitan Atlanta's continued high quality of life. With 1.2 million new residents in the past decade, the region grew the fourth fastest of any metropolitan area in the United States.

Despite new emissions control programs, the growth in population, and resulting traffic, has kept the 13-county region classified as a "serious" non-attainment area for ozone. In 2000, the region ranked sixth in the nation in the number of days the air exceeded safe ozone standards.

The air quality problem reached a crisis in 1998 when federal transportation funding for the region was cut off because the region could not gain federal approval of a transportation program that could conform to the air quality requirements of the federal Clean Air Act.

Acting in response to the crisis, the Georgia Legislature created a new transportation agency, the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA), that would have powers to establish new transportation services, control regionally significant private and public developments and review transportation planning in the region.

GRTA has the authority to manage transportation and air quality in areas that are in non-attainment of federal air quality standards. Currently the following 13 counties in Metropolitan Atlanta are in non-attainment: Cherokee, Clayton, Cobb, Coweta, DeKalb, Douglas, Fayette, Forsyth, Fulton, Gwinnett, Henry, Paulding and Rockdale.

Our Mission

It is the mission of GRTA to provide the citizen's of Georgia with transportation choices, improved air quality, and better land use in order to enhance their quality of life and promote growth that can be sustained by future generations.

Our Vision

The Authority will work to plan and implement a transportation system that is multi-modal, seamless and accessible to all citizens.

The Authority will encourage land use policies that promote efficient use of infrastructure investments.

The Authority will operate within a decision-making framework that values public participation and connects transportation choices, land use and the overall Quality of Life.

The Authority will serve the best interests of the region by working in cooperation with other agencies and governments that are involved in planning and transportation.

The Authority will measure its effectiveness in improving air quality, traffic, accessibility and land use.

1.2 THE PROBLEM

Since the 1960s, Atlanta's economy has been “booming”. The boom has lasted for so long now that it is entirely possible there are current metro residents who take for granted Atlanta's distinction as one of the fastest-growing areas in the country. The local SMARTRAQ research program- Strategies for Metro Atlanta's Regional Transportation and Air Quality- has provided some succinct perspectives on Atlanta area growth:

From 1990 to 2000, the region added more than 1.2 million residents – the equivalent of absorbing the entire population of metropolitan Orlando, Florida. Metro Atlanta's current 4.1 million residents now represent over half of the population of the state of Georgia.

Throughout the 1990s, metro Atlanta led the nation in new job creation and led all U.S. housing markets. During this period, regional per capita income increased by 60 percent.

Factors contributing to Atlanta's astonishing growth include a mild climate, the region's location as a major transportation hub, the world's busiest airport, stable energy costs, high-tech industry, a large pool of well-educated workers, several major research universities, a high quality of life and abundant, undeveloped land.

SMARTRAQ, “Trends, Implications & Strategies for Balanced Growth”

Commensurate with the significant economic benefits of its growth, metro Atlanta is paying a steep price. The SMARTRAQ report enumerates unintended consequences to the region that have become increasingly obvious over the past few years, including air quality problems that endanger our health, traffic congestion that has spread farther and faster than anyone expected, severe limitations in the water supply emphasized by

drought, environmentally dirty rivers requiring court orders for clean-up, and such loss of tree cover as to compound air pollution.



This is a daunting menu of problems for metro Atlanta to solve. The difficulties are compounded by the fact that Atlanta's dominant economic influence has long been expanding outward to such an extent that the official, federal designation of the Atlanta metropolitan statistical area in 2003 swelled from 20 to 28 counties around the City of Atlanta – an area hundreds of miles wide.

There is ample evidence that Atlanta's development pattern has become more dispersed as employment has followed scattered residential suburbs throughout the region. Downtown Atlanta that was once home to 25 percent of the region's jobs now accounts for just 6 percent. Mobility and access for the region's four million residents has deteriorated dramatically. The dispersed development pattern has created many suburb-to-suburb transportation needs. Despite the region's significant investments

in its freeways and transit systems, radial and suburban crosstown corridors alike are very congested. And because of the lack of transit services in the outlying counties, central area transit-dependent residents cannot get to most suburban jobs. In 1999, residents of metro Atlanta drove more miles (35) per person each day than did residents of any of the nation's 30 largest metropolitan areas.

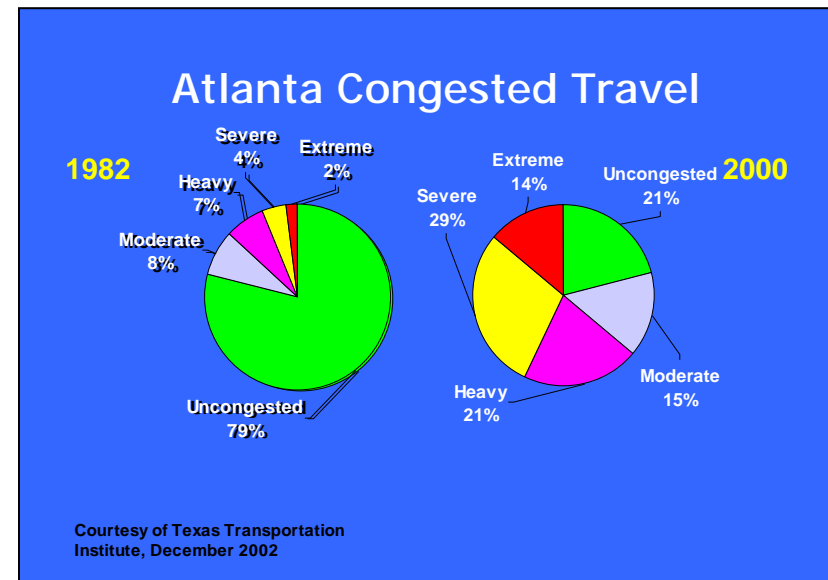
Increasing congestion and the dependency of the region's population on the automobile has played a large role in the region's recent failure to meet federal air quality standards. By 1996, the Atlanta Regional Commission's Regional Transportation Plan and the three-year Transportation Improvement Program could no longer conform with Georgia's State Implementation Plan for attaining the air quality standard for ozone. This triggered actions in which federal transportation dollars were withheld from the region for major capacity investments by August 1998. Since then, the Atlanta region has restored its conformity for attaining air quality standards and federal transportation funds are flowing again. But growth projections for the current 13-county non-attainment area will only be achieved if the region can grow in an environmentally sustainable way. Continued regional growth is in jeopardy unless we restore and strengthen the area's attractiveness and economic competitiveness both in reality and perception.

GRTA is seriously concerned about the staggering implications of the transportation-related challenges facing metro Atlanta and is committed to tackling the problems of traffic congestion and air quality.

Traffic Congestion

According to the Texas Transportation Institute, traffic congestion is increasing in all U.S. urban areas. Nationwide, traffic congestion affects more of the transportation system every year –

congestion has spread to more cities, to more of the road system, to more time during the day and to more days of the week. Even by this standard, in the 1990s the time consumed by traffic delays per person grew faster in Atlanta than in any other metro area in the nation. By 2000, the average Atlanta area resident spent 53 hours sitting in traffic, up from 25 hours just ten years before. (*Urban Mobility Report, June 2002*). According to the Texas Transportation Institute, the number of roads in Atlanta that are congested during peak periods has increased from 21% in 1982 to 79% in 2000.



Can more roads or lanes slow the growth of congestion? Theoretically yes, but the region would have to increase its road capacity at the same rate as traffic grows. In practical terms, such a policy would be difficult and prohibitively costly to implement because of the length of time it takes to plan and construct major transportation facilities, because new facilities themselves may generate additional trips that were not being made before, and because such an aggressive road-building

program would have to be sustained for the long-term despite funding constraints.

The 2000 version of our 25-year Regional Transportation Plan projected that even after spending over \$37 billion on transportation projects, year 2025 traffic congestion will be 28 percent worse than it is now. For anyone who objects to wasting time and fuel sitting in traffic, this is a bleak outlook indeed. The Atlanta region needs more and better transportation choices for its residents.

Air Quality

Minimum standards for air quality are established by the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990. Places with air quality that meet or exceed the National Ambient Air Quality Standards are considered attainment areas. Non-attainment is the federal designation for areas that have not met the standards for pollutants. A place may be an attainment area for one pollutant and a non-attainment area for another.

Thirteen counties in the Atlanta region have been designated as non-attainment and being in serious violation of the federal one-hour ozone standard. It is perhaps less well known that vehicle emissions account for more than half of the region's nitrogen oxides (NOx), a key component of the region's ozone problem. When we are not actually sitting in traffic, we are driving an incredible number of miles. Metro Atlanta residents drive 100 million miles every day – this is more than the distance from the earth to the sun (*Texas Transportation Institute, 1999*). If not resolved, the Atlanta region's ozone problem could become a significant health issue.

“Research conducted in several dozen cities world-wide, including Atlanta, relates air pollution to health impacts and respiratory toxicity, as measured by self-reported symptoms, lung function measurements, emergency room visits, hospital admissions, and other markers. Children, the elderly, and patients with respiratory diseases such as asthma and emphysema are particularly susceptible. Ozone can also trigger asthma attacks...In Atlanta, emergency room visits increase on high ozone days, and decreased dramatically during the 1996 Olympics when ozone levels were low.”

Dr. Howard Frumkin, Emory University, SMARTAQ's Trends, Implications & Strategies for Balanced Growth for the Atlanta Region

The Atlanta Regional Commission's Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) process includes meeting future deadlines for establishing conformity with Georgia's State Implementation Plan (SIP), and thereby meeting the requirements of the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 under the current one-hour standard for ozone attainment. However, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is establishing a more stringent eight-hour standard for ozone attainment that will likely increase the size of the Atlanta non-attainment area (from 13 to 21 counties) and set new emission targets and dates. In addition, there have been several legal challenges, locally and nationally, in the air quality arena.

Achieving conformity with federal air quality standards has been, and will continue to be, a formidable challenge for the Atlanta region.

1.3 THE REGIONAL TRANSIT ACTION PLAN

How do you offer more and better transportation choices? First, develop a blueprint for the region. This is the intent of the Regional Transit Action Plan (RTAP), a two-year study that will recommend the foundations for a seamless, integrated public

transportation network in the Atlanta region. Representatives from public transportation providers in the region, the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC), the Georgia Department of Transportation, the metro counties and other experts serve on a Project Advisory Committee to help guide the study.

The RTAP study began in November 2001 and is expected to produce short-range and long-range transit action plans for the 13-county non-attainment area. In addition, the RTAP has developed a regional express bus plan that is now being implemented. This Draft Concept Plan, the result of the first 12 months of work, is designed to provide an initial assessment of public transit needs and opportunities in the 13-county area. More important, it will provide valuable input to the Atlanta Regional Commission's ongoing efforts to develop its 2030 Regional Transportation Plan.

The Draft Concept Plan is so named because it is GRTA's initial effort to define what the future public transportation network in Atlanta should look like. Though it has been based on several months of public involvement activities and technical analyses, it is not yet the final answer. Over the next six months, the Draft Concept Plan will be subject to more rigorous testing and evaluation using ARC's regional travel demand model. The plan will then be refined and Finance and Phasing Plans will be developed that lay out how the plan can be funded and implemented. This effort will culminate in the final Regional Transit Action Plan that is scheduled to be completed by summer 2003.

While the Draft Concept Plan is an initial or preliminary snapshot of the future transit system blueprint and is subject to further refinement, the extensive public involvement and technical analyses have led to some very important understandings of what works and what doesn't. The Draft Concept Plan is far different in its actions, projects, policies and services than any previous transit systems plan for the Atlanta region. While the Draft

Concept Plan is an "aspirations-based" plan (i.e., it is not financially constrained) it is apparent to GRTA and all its planning partners that the region's financial resources are limited and any future transit improvements need to focus on optimizing value for our limited funds.

But focusing on transit improvements that have a high value relative to their cost does not mean that the region need have a short-sighted vision for the future. The Draft Concept Plan lays out a bold new direction in extending high quality transit services into congested corridors through its Regional Express Bus Plan and Bus Rapid Transit technology. The Draft Concept Plan also identifies the need for expanded local bus service throughout the 13-county region; a seamless, integrated fare policy for the region; an investment in Intelligent Transportation Systems technologies; and other support tools that will enable more people to perceive transit as a viable option for their travel needs.

These planned improvements will build upon the solid foundation of the high-capacity rapid rail line and extensive bus network that MARTA has established in Fulton and DeKalb counties. These planned improvements will also be coordinated and integrated with the transit services provided by Cobb Community Transit, Gwinnett County Transit and Clayton County C-TRAN.

The Draft Concept Plan is organized in an Executive Summary and six technical chapters described below.

Chapter 1. Setting describes reasons for the formation of GRTA, its Mission and Vision statements, a capsule analysis of traffic congestion and air quality problems in Metropolitan Atlanta, and the role of the Regional Transit Action Plan in becoming a blueprint for the region's public transportation network.

Chapter 2. Public Involvement highlights the public outreach and interagency coordination activities that GRTA has employed in the RTAP study. These activities have been instrumental in

GRTA hearing the perspectives of the general public as well as its planning partners in the region.

Chapter 3. Transit Needs Assessment summarizes the detailed technical analyses that went into presenting an objective look at where and what kind of public transit needs are present in the region.

Chapter 4. RTAP Planning Process describes the planning process that GRTA has undertaken thus far in developing this Draft Concept Plan. It presents the RTAP Goals and Objectives, Evaluation Methodology, Performance Measures, Initial Definition of Potential Transit Projects, and finally the Evaluation of Potential Projects.

Chapter 5. Action Steps outlines the actions, projects, services and policies in 11 Action Steps that form the “blueprint” for the Atlanta region’s future public transit system. The Action Steps focus on five themes: *Provide More and Better Transit Choices, Enhance the Customer Experience, Develop Integrated System, Invest Wisely / Optimize Value, and Begin Today / Plan for the Future.*

Chapter 6. Next Steps describes the refinement of the Draft Concept Plan that will take place over the next six months. During this period, each of the projects, service and policies will undergo rigorous testing and evaluation using ARC’s regional travel demand model. The final RTAP will then present Finance and Phasing Plans that lay out how the plan can be funded and implemented.